

Nicodemus

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1. The Pharisee Nicodemus

The gospel of John is a very special gospel. It is distinct from the three "synoptic"¹ gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in its style, its selection of topics, and its emphasis on the self revelation of Jesus as Son of God. It is virtually certain that the author was the apostle John, the son of Zebedee. He summed up the purpose of his report as follows (John 20:30-31):

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John described a series of "signs", miraculous acts done by Jesus, with the purpose of demonstrating that he is the Son of God. As the first sign, he reported the transformation of water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee.² He explicitly continued with the healing of the dying son of the official, designating it as the second sign at Cana.³ A further sign was the feeding of the 5000.⁴ Although his many signs convinced a large number of people,⁵ the leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees, repudiated them because they didn't *want* to believe.⁶ Therefore, what is told us about Nicodemus, the Pharisee and "teacher of Israel", is of a quite particular importance (John 3:1-2):

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

Nicodemus addressed Jesus as "Rabbi", which means "my teacher". With this, he declared himself ready to follow him and learn from him. But this knowledge that Jesus has been sent by God is not enough, as can be seen from the introduction immediately preceding this report (John 2:23-25):

²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Jesus furthered Nicodemus in his spiritual understanding by pointing to the fact that, despite their intensive study of the Old Testament, the Jewish leadership (including Nicodemus himself) had not yet grasped what the kingdom of God is, nor who the Messiah must be.

2. God's kingdom isn't a matter of earthly institutions

Nicodemus would most likely have understood the "kingdom" of God to refer to the covenant which God had made with the people of Israel at Sinai, bound to the condition of keeping all of his commandments. For the Jews, and above all for the scribes and Pharisees, keeping the Law of Moses was of decisive importance. Of course they themselves interpreted this law and organized and controlled the entire life of Israel accordingly. And it is in this pattern that their expectation of the Messiah was straitjacketed. But Jesus denounced their materialistic understanding of Scripture, their superficiality, hypocrisy and spiritual blindness, unsparingly and without discussion.⁷ With Nicodemus, however, he entered into a friendly conversation (John 3:3-4):

³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

¹ The *synoptic* gospels are those which can be "*seen together*", because they have much in common.

² John 2:1-11.

³ John 4:46-54.

⁴ John 6:1-14.

⁵ John 7:31; 9:16; 12:18.

⁶ John 6:26 and 30; 9:16; 11:47; 12:37.

⁷ Matthew 23.

"Born again"⁸ can also be translated "born from above". But this explains the misunderstanding by Nicodemus only partially, especially after he himself had acknowledged that Jesus has come from God, that is, "from above". Thus, he should have known that it is not a question of a natural birth, of a visible, material event.

The same mistake was made by the Jewish leadership of that day, where it was thought that God's kingdom would materialize in the framework of their earthly institutions. Jesus subsequently emphasized explicitly that these Jews, in particular, including Nicodemus, must be born again into a new, spiritual life. The entire Jewish establishment had completely missed God's objective. The same thing applies similarly to some modern churches where it is believed that God's kingdom would be somehow bound to their earthly institutions, hierarchies, sacraments and rituals.

3. Spiritual dimension of faith and new birth

Nicodemus was therefore in need of further explanations about being born again (John 3:5-10):

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

The natural birth is characterized by the "flesh", which designates natural humanity in its earthly lowness. The spiritual birth, however, occurs invisibly and by God's work alone. By the metaphor of the wind, Jesus shows that this work of the Holy Spirit does not depend on human activities. Both Greek and Hebrew use the same word for "wind" and "spirit", and this same word is also used for God's Spirit.⁹ And just as God's Spirit cannot be seen or recognized by humans, someone born of the Spirit cannot be recognized and assessed by others. It is only the consequences in the lives of the born again that are recognizable: "you hear its sound". Being born into a new life occurs through the "baptism of the Spirit" or being filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus later used the metaphor of the "rivers of living water" (John 7:38-39):

³⁸ "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

4. Baptism of water and of the Spirit: purification for the new life

Jesus described this new birth as a birth "of water and the Spirit". The birth "of water" could certainly not point to the future christian baptism, for Nicodemus would not have been able to understand this at all. Nor is there any indication in the text that John's baptism was meant. For Nicodemus it made most sense, on the basis of his knowledge of the Old Testament, to be reminded of the words of prophets who said that God himself would purify his people from all their sins and their idolatry by means of "pure water", by creating their hearts into an entirely new life, by means of placing his Spirit into their innermost being (Ezekiel 36:25-27):¹⁰

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

With this, Jesus could lead Nicodemus to a better understanding of the new birth. Thus, "water" and "Spirit" both refer to the event which christians were to call "being born again". It marks the contrast between the *human* confession to be in need of purification from their sins (the metaphor of the "water") and the new creation by means of *God's* gift of the Spirit.

⁸ Greek *gennêthê ânôthen*.

⁹ Greek *pneûma*, Hebrew *ruach*.

¹⁰ Isaiah said it in a somewhat similar way in 44:3.

But these are but two aspects of the same event. Being baptized by the Spirit must not be misunderstood as a so-called "second blessing" which might possibly occur months or years after conversion only, and which would perhaps even have to be manifested by "speaking in tongues"¹¹ or other odd behavior. Such practices, which may easily lead to manipulation of believers, are contradicted by biblical teaching. There *cannot* be any delay between conversion and Spirit baptism. In the parable of the lost son who has decided to return to his father, confessing his sins, the father doesn't make him wait, but *immediately* runs and embraces him.¹²

Also, sound doctrine excludes any coupling of this event of divine creation (of the new birth or Spirit baptism) with any sacraments, such as water baptism, which by its mere performance¹³ is supposed to have an effect in the baptized. No church institution and no priest must presume to take the place of God, and to "meddle in his affairs", as it were. Divine promises, which were given God's people (collectively or individually) in quite different contexts, are abused if one takes them to bind the new birth to sacraments.

Membership in the universal Church of Christ depends on having consciously and willingly accepted Jesus as one's personal Savior and Lord and therefore having been created new by God's Spirit. Of course, infants aren't capable of making any such decision.¹⁴ Therefore infant baptism is biblically untenable.¹⁵ And then even declaring such infants church members on the basis of their baptism is an egregious error. Unfortunately, it starts appearing even in previously biblically rooted free churches, producing confusion (or has even more serious consequences in the perishing of the unconverted).

John Wesley, an anglican priest, founded an evangelistic movement which became the Methodist church. The United Methodist church issued a document, *By Water and the Spirit*,¹⁶ dealing with baptism and the new birth, which reflects this confusion, even in Wesley's own thinking. A Methodist commentator of the German version wrote:¹⁷

Wesley himself wasn't afraid of logical contradictions when he... emphasized that baptism cannot simply be equated with the new birth. But according to [*anglocatholic*] church doctrine, which he wanted to share, all who were baptized in their infancy were born again at the same time. Nevertheless, he said a later life renewal by God's Spirit was necessary for salvation.

5. The Word of God became flesh

For the time being, Nicodemus didn't yet grasp the mission of Jesus. He had said: *we know* that you are a teacher sent by God, and that God is with you. This, however, could be said of any of the prophets sent by God, but Jesus is not just any prophet. And Nicodemus didn't even *believe* him when he talked about the new life. So Jesus proceeded in guiding him by testifying that he, though being God's Son, had become man by incarnation (John 3:11-13):

¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

¹¹ The Greek *glôssais laléō* (whence the term *Glossolalia* is derived) must correctly be translated "to speak in foreign languages", as is often obvious from the context. Unfortunately, various otherwise excellent bible versions render it "to speak in tongues", but it has nothing in common with the irrational "speaking in tongues" practiced in some pentecostal or charismatic circles, cp. R. Liebi (2007), *Sprachenreden oder Zungenreden?* (CLV Bielefeld, ISBN 978-3-89397-556-3).

¹² Luke 15:17-20.

¹³ Latin *ex opere operato*.

¹⁴ It would be another disastrous reaction to believe that infants might possibly not have a part in God's salvation because they cannot consciously turn to Jesus. God is just, always dealing with everyone according to how much responsibility he or she is capable of taking.

¹⁵ The bible doesn't contain any direct or indirect indications of infant baptism being necessary or advisable. Nor can it be shown that it was practiced in New Testament times.

¹⁶ *By Water & The Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* (1996); <http://www.gbod.org/worship/images/water&spirit.pdf>.

¹⁷ Commentary to the German version of the UMC Document, *Durch Wasser und Geist*, EMK-Forum 26 (Medienwerk der EMK, Stuttgart: 2004; ISBN 3-89725-065-9) (my translation).

Jesus picked up the "we know" of Nicodemus and told him: we speak of what we know: not only you, but so do I. Jesus had told him about the new life from above, calling this just "earthly things". Yet not even this was believed. At best, the Jews had a hope for eternal life later, but with Jesus, it is a spiritual reality here on earth already.

"Heavenly things", on the other hand, refer to the fact that the Son of Man descended from heaven, out of his fellowship with God the Father, and is going to ascend into heaven again. Here we find an echo of the prologue, the fundamental introduction of the gospel of John (John 1:1-2 and 14):

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God... ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

God became man in Jesus and descended into the lowest regions of the earth,¹⁸ "even [to] death on a cross".¹⁹ Jesus came out of that heavenly glory, in order to die under deepest scorn on the cross for the salvation of humans.

6. Jesus crucified in the flesh, risen bodily

It is true that the Jews expected a Messiah who was to put everything in order and reign as king. But Isaiah had impressively described the Messiah as one who would first have to suffer (Isaiah 53:5):

But he was wounded for *our* transgressions; he was crushed for *our* iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought *us* peace, and with his stripes *we* are healed.

They repressed this revelation and supposed this suffering servant of God to exclusively represent Israel. But who then should be the "we", if the suffering servant was Israel? The entire chapter of Isaiah 53 points to the fact that it is the *Messiah* who had to suffer for Israel, yes, even for all humans. Therefore Jesus then showed Nicodemus the second aspect of his having become man, the suffering (John 3:14-15):

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus is pointing to an event which happened during Israel's desert wanderings, which was familiar to Nicodemus (Numbers 21:9):

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Moses "set" the bronze serpent "on a pole". Jesus said, he "lifted up" the serpent. This again gave Nicodemus the link to what had been said before (John 3:13):

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

In the translations, this may sound like the Son of Man *first ascended* and then *descended again later*. However, the "ascended" at first does not refer to the Son of Man, but to "no one". Its tense is the perfect, which in Greek designates a finished action, yet does not emphasize the action itself, but the essential aspect of the resulting state,²⁰ namely, in this case, to personally know heaven. It is only indirectly that the ascension of the Son of Man into heaven is pointed at. Whether this ascension occurred in the past or was to occur in the future is not yet obvious from the saying. On the other hand, the "descended" is, in the Greek, a past participle, "the one descended",²¹ which unmistakably assigns the descending to the past, not the future. The one descended is unambiguously called "the Son of

¹⁸ Ephesians 4:9: Greek *eís tà kathôtera méré tês gês* (into the deepest parts of the earth - or, as "earth" may also mean "humanity", in context, to the lowliest people and into the greatest misery of humanity). There is no hint here of an "underworld" into which he would have descended. Nor is this claimed in 1 Peter 4:6 where it says that "the gospel was preached even to those who are dead", for this could have happened at any earlier time, when those people were still living, either by means of divine messengers or directly through God talking to their hearts.

¹⁹ Philippians 2:8.

²⁰ Greek *à nabé bēken*, perfect: "has [definitively] ascended".

²¹ Greek *ò katabás*, aorist participle (the aorist tense corresponds approximately to the French *passé simple*): "the one who has descended [at a given point in time]". The aorist tense, as well, may indicate a past or future action, but it emphasizes its uniqueness.

Man", which is how Jesus usually referred to himself. Now, as Jesus was sojourning on earth when he made that statement, he intimated in this way that he himself had become incarnated in the past, but was going to rise bodily in a short time. One could paraphrase John 3:13 as follows: "To date, no one has ever ascended into heaven; I for my part, the Son of Man who have descended from heaven, shall soon return there, as I have belonged to heaven since eternity past, being completely at home there".

The incarnation, humiliation, and crucifixion of Jesus is characterized by his "flesh",²² his exaltation, resurrection, and glorification on God's throne by his "body". In the New Testament, human corporal nature in its lowliness is always called "flesh", but in its God-given dignity it is called "body".²³

7. God's holiness, justice, and judgment

God himself has become man in his Son, who died as an atoning sacrifice for all who accept him by faith, and rose again into God's glory. This unheard-of characterization of the Messiah could hardly as yet be grasped by Nicodemus. Therefore it is now explained more directly (John 3:16-17):²⁴

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Nicodemus certainly realized that God is love, but here it is also indicated that this doesn't exclude God's holiness and justice, which require his judgement over sin. Indirectly, this once again reminds us of John's prologue (John 1:11-12 and 16-18):

¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God... ¹⁶ And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made [*him*] known.

Nicodemus also knew that God is holy, so that humans cannot approach him, and that therefore his justice requires an atoning sacrifice for saving sinful humans from his wrath. But that this salvation must occur through the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God, the Messiah, was beyond him - one who had grown up and been taught in the Pharisee tradition.

The animal sacrifices were ineffective in themselves, yet in prophetic symbolism they pointed to the cross of Jesus. Unfortunately, to this day, when they read the Old Testament, a "veil"²⁵ remains over the hearts of those Jews who have not yet recognized Jesus as their Messiah. This veil is removed in Christ *only*. So "their minds were hardened", and they don't see that it is the Messiah who had to offer himself in sacrifice (Isaiah 53:5):

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

The incredible extent of God's love is emphasized, so that as many as possible may believe in Jesus in order that they "should not perish but have eternal life".²⁶

8. Freedom and responsibility - faith and judgment

Despite the all-embracing, omnipotent love of God, humans can decide freely whether they want to receive the light and Word of God, Jesus Christ, or harden their hearts against him (John 3:18-20):

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the

²² "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14); "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6); cf. also: "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26).

²³ "Flesh" (Greek *sarx*) characterizes the *lowliness* of humans and their depraved world, "body" (Greek *soma*) the created *dignity* of the corporal dimension, which shall have a part in the eternal glory of resurrection life. Jesus has become *flesh*, but he is risen *bodily*, not *fleshly*.

²⁴ The text of John 3:16-21 does not show whether these are the very words of Jesus or John's (just as divinely inspired) comment.

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:14-16.

²⁶ John 3:16.

judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

How is it at all possible that someone decides not to come to God, to the loving Father, who is running to his encounter, in order to embrace him and make him a child of the King? Humans prefer darkness to light because their works are evil, and they are afraid of losing face. This is a decision for which everyone individually bears full responsibility. Yet with the decision against Jesus, one has already surrendered oneself to the condemnation leading inescapably to the future divine judgment.

Here we see again how John flashes back to his prologue (John 1:5):

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome [*or: comprehended*] it.

The light is God's Word, the Son of God, and the darkness is the lost humanity, they who reject him, the only Savior available. The word translated "overcome" may either mean to "find, meet" someone, then to "comprehend" the circumstances in which that person is encountered, or to "receive (him) into oneself".²⁷

Couldn't God push people a little bit in their thinking and deciding, so that they would think better of it and receive Jesus in their hearts? In order to be easy on their touchiness, he wouldn't necessarily need to make them aware of this manipulation. No, God can *not* do this, for he is truthful. It is on purpose that he has given humans this freedom of decision, in order not to make them puppets. He created them capable of having a good conversation with him, genuine persons. A husband wouldn't want to have a wife who was *forced* to marry him. This is exactly analogous to God's wish in his covenant with humans. It doesn't reflect any lack of love but is, on the contrary, an expression of the greatest love possible.

If anyone consciously prefers to remain in darkness, he *is* already judged, "because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God". The "is condemned" is in the perfect tense, thus it marks a definitive event having a permanent result of being lost. The reason for this being condemned is that "he has not believed", where the word used in the original text for "not" shows²⁸ that the decision of unbelief was taken in the thinking of the person concerned, and was therefore an entirely conscious and goal-directed refusal.

But those who have decided to receive Jesus by faith, although they are aware of the fact that in this they have to confess to be lost sinners, behave differently (John 3:21):

But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

The opposite of doing "wicked things" is not doing "good things" but doing "what is true" - literally doing "the truth".²⁹ And it is Jesus who is the truth.³⁰ If someone converts to Jesus, "he is a new creation".³¹ He now knows "that nothing good dwells in" him,³² but that the good works had been "prepared beforehand [*by God*], that we should walk in them",³³ i.e. carry them out. Therefore he "comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God", and God is honored.

In this way, any kind of pressure to perform ceases, for those saved by Jesus needn't accomplish anything at all, neither for their own salvation before God, nor for their justification before men. At God's judgment, good works could not contribute anything to one's own justification anyhow, for Jesus has accomplished justification on the cross once for all. But whatever good such a person does under the guidance of the Holy Spirit now dwelling in him is fundamentally good and honors God much more than all apparently "good" works performed in a self-centered way. To give praise to God is the prerequisite and criterion for the real value of doing what is good: in this way it becomes doing "the truth".

²⁷ Greek *katélaben* (aorist), cp. F.Rienecker, *Sprachlicher Schlüssel zum Griechischen Neuen Testament* (Brunnen-Verlag Giessen, 21.Aufl. 2003, ISBN 3-7655-5733-1), for John 1:5; Gingrich, *Greek NT Lexicon*, p.102: *katalambánō* means: *seize, win, attain, make one's own*: for John 1:5, there are two sets of possibilities: (1) *grasp, comprehend, appreciate* and (2) *overcome, put out, master*.

²⁸ Greek *mê*, rather than *ou*, cp. F.Rienecker for John 3:18.

²⁹ Greek *poiōn tēn álētheian*.

³⁰ John 14:6.

³¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17: Greek *kainê* (*new or made new*) *kt̄sis* (*divine creation*). The Greek of this verse doesn't have the verb "is", thus another possible translation is "there is" in place of "he is".

³² Romans 7:18.

³³ Ephesians 2:10.

9. Nicodemus, a sincere thinker

Jesus severely indicted the Pharisees, mainly for their selfishness, hypocrisy, and abuse of power. Why then did he talk so friendly and in great detail with the Pharisee Nicodemus? Jesus often did things people didn't expect. For instance, he had instructed his disciples not to go to the Samaritans, or to the Gentiles, but "rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel".³⁴ But when he passed through Samaria to go to Galilee, he met a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.³⁵ Why did he talk with her? As for Nicodemus, he later took severe risks for Jesus at least twice. First he confronted the high priests and Pharisees, asking them not to condemn Jesus without granting him a just procedure.³⁶ Then Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea to prepare a respectable burial for Jesus after his crucifixion, by bringing about 100 pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes for embalming him.³⁷

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, but his attitude, quite unlike the one typical of the Pharisees, was characterized by sincerity, fair-mindedness, thoughtfulness and courage. Apparently, Nicodemus had become a believer through his conversation with Jesus. With his example, God's Word teaches us much about the triune God and about human nature.

God designed man in his wisdom and created him in his image. He gave him the dignity and responsibility of freedom, and therefore he normally keeps himself hidden in ambiguity. As an unavoidable consequence of this freedom, man also has to have the capability of going astray, of sinning, and of rebelling against God. But because God is absolutely holy and just, rebellion necessarily leads to condemnation under God's wrath. Yet God's love is so immense that he took this inevitable judgment upon himself in his only begotten Son,³⁸ thereby giving lost man a way of salvation.

From eternity past, this was God's gracious plan of salvation, which he implemented in a long history of salvation. The statute or order of the Law of Moses was a step of preparation for the cross of Golgotha, taking about 1500 years. The resurrection of the crucified One established the order of the new covenant through the work of the Holy Spirit in the believers in Jesus, and with this the extension of the mission of preaching the gospel to all peoples. The offer of conversion and baptism of faith must be told all of them, so that the largest possible number of people, according to God's preknowledge, may be saved.

³⁴ Matthew 10:6; cf. 15:24.

³⁵ John 4:1-42.

³⁶ John 7:45-52.

³⁷ John 19:38-42 (100 pounds: 33 kg).

³⁸ The Greek *monogenês*, translated "only" in the English Standard Version, is more precisely rendered "only begotten" in the New King James Version.